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Theology as a Practice of Life in “Philokalia”

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The Greek term φιλοκαλία means “love for the good or for the beautiful”. Explaining the meaning of this term, Father Pavel Florensky noted that “philokalia” means “love unto beauty” and stressed that “asceticism does not create a “kind” person, but a “beautiful” one”, therefore, in his opinion, the feature of the Holy Ascetics was not their “kindness”, which is found in the ordinary carnal people, who can be very sinful, but “a spiritual beauty, the dazzling beauty of a radiant, luminous person”, that is completely inaccessible to the carnal persons¹. According to the Russian thinker, “philokalia” was not only the system of moral values and norms, but foremost a path for spiritual transformation (“theosis”), encompassing the entirety of human nature, namely, mind, heart

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1. Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, (Moscow: The Way, 1914), 99.

and body. Thus, φιλοκαλία refers to a special practice of monastic life, a certain mode of spiritual achievement.

In the Later Antiquity, some of authors identified the word “philokalia” with philosophy as a “love unto wisdom”. Nevertheless, in the Christian tradition this term began to be used in relation to “anthologies”, “collections of texts and passages” selected in accordance with different special topics. Hence, the well-known collection of texts under the title of *The Philokalia* represents a unique monument of spiritual literature, the authors of which were authoritative Christian theologians and great ascetics. In the subsequent tradition of Orthodox monasticism, these works were perceived as the most important instructions for every monastic.

The first edition of *The Philokalia* in Russia was published in the Church Slavonic language in the translation of St. Paisius Velichkovsky (1722-1794). It was printed in two parts in 1793 and in 1798. In turn, the five-volume edition in Russian language translated by St. Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894) was published in 1877-1890. In this connection, Archpriest George Florovsky emphasized that the publication of *The Philokalia* in translations into Church Slavonic and Russian languages became a significant event not only for the life of the Church and monasticism, but it also acquired a special significance “in the history of Russian culture in general”². However, it should be noted that there are some differences between the Slavonic edition of *The Philokalia* and its version in Russian language. Anyway, it is important to note that subsequently both variants of translations were reprinted in Russia many times.

2. George Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1937), 127.

It is known that the Church Slavonic version of *The Philokalia* was one of the books that Saint Seraphim of Sarov kept with him in his monastery. In addition, this edition was mentioned with a special reverence by the famous elders of Optina Monastery – Saint Makarius (1788-1860) and Saint Ambrose (1812-1891). With symbolic import, the last Hegumen of the Valaam Monastery, Father Chariton (1872-1947), published in 1938 a collection of texts “On the Jesus prayer”, considered by his contemporaries as *A Little Philokalia*, containing instructions on the prayer life of the Holy Fathers and the Russian ascetics of piety.

Thus, on the one hand, the texts of *The Philokalia* present the prospect of the development of spiritual monastic practices; on the other hand, it gives a good opportunity to study the fundamental foundations of the Orthodox way of life. Furthermore, the moral strategies and ascetic procedures prescribed by the authors of *The Philokalia* appear to us to be relevant for the modern ethical problems.

Firstly, it is a well-known that the collection of texts that constitute *The Philokalia* represents a type of contemplative ascetic literature, explicating the monastic practices and the experience of inner prayer. Secondly, it should be noted that, in the understanding of the Holy Fathers, the status of theologian was decidedly associated with inner prayer. And thirdly, the theology was based on the practice of monastic asceticism. So, for example, Evagrius the Solitary said: “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a true theologian”³. At the

3. Evagrius the Solitary, “On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts, 61”,

same time, they contrasted the Christian practice of prayer to the activity of scholars who preferred to philosophize; for the authors of *The Philokalia*, inner prayer was the most important activity of all and the highest joy.

In this sense, *The Philokalia* differs principally from the Medieval Scholastic treatises like “Summa”, “Commentaries” and “Disputations”, in which the methods of discursive knowledge (syllogistics, logical conclusions, reasoning, etc.) have priority, and truth is explained as “accordance of thing and intellect” (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*). This definition goes back to the Jewish philosopher Isaac Israeli ben Solomon (ca. 850-932), then it was used by Ibn Sina (980-1037), the Islamic thinker, and from him it was taken by Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 21, 2). At first glance, it seems that this definition asserts an ontological measurement of “truth”. Actually, it implied that truth is the result of a judgment, because the intellectual cognition of things was provided by the discursive abilities of the human mind.

Thus, the primary condition for the activity of scholastic theologians of Middle Ages was the development of mental capabilities, involving strict discipline of mind and perfection of logical thinking. Later in the tradition of Jesuits, those skills were transformed in a special psychological training of personal self-control. The actual founders of this scholastic methodology were the representatives of the mendicant Orders, namely, Dominicans and Franciscans, who lectured Theology in the medieval Universities. However, the peak of its development was reached in the frames of scientific and educational activity of Jesuits in the early modern

in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, trans. Gerald Palmer, Kallistos (Ware), Philip Sherrard, Volume 1, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 66.

period. It should be stressed that University professors and students formed their own ethics of professional activity and way of life, which did not always conform to the norms of Dominicans and Franciscans, leading to controversies within their respective institutions. Anyway, this system of moral requirements specifically for the University corporations proved to be an important event in Medieval times.

In addition, the disputes (*disputatio*) became an important component of the system of education in the Medieval Universities. They were held in a form of regular teaching seminars and as the special open public discussions for the whole University. For example, such were traditionally organized in Sorbonne at Christmas and Easter, including the very popular “disputes on the free topics” (*disputatio quodlibetica*). Thus, the scientific debates were extremely important and played a significant role in the formation of Medieval scholastics. In this perspective, the truth in the understanding of University’s scholars was determined not so by the experience of the Christian faith and not so by the monastic ascetic practices, but more so by the aspiration for scientific “objectivity” of knowledge, ensuring strict compliance of the formal logic rules and the accuracy of reasoning procedures. In this way, the Medieval scholasticism was based on the priority of human reason. However, it was otherwise for the authors of *The Philokalia*: for the Holy Fathers the main organ of spiritual life was the heart, and the principal task of ascetic activity was a practice of *theosis*. At the same time, they considered that the heart covers a variety of experiences and manifestations of human feelings. For example, tears were perceived both as the acts of ordinary emotions and as the implementation of a special spiritual “catharsis”. It can be strange for the contemporary people because in the

Modern culture tears are looked like as outcome of humiliation of personality. In the ascetic practice of Orthodox monasticism, warm cordial tears were considered as a positive feeling because the self-humiliation was an important part of the care for soul.

It is in this way that the heart was conceived as a guiding principle both for the human mind and for the emotional life of a person. Moreover, the heart was connected with the conscience and with moral purposes, associated with the influence of different pleasures of imagination and sensuality. In this connection heart was the center of all internal life and the core of personality. For instance, Saint Gregory Palamas named the heart: “the shrine of the intelligence and the chief intellectual organ of the body”⁴. The authors of *The Philokalia* brought to the forefront themes such as “courage of the heart”, “purity of the heart”, and, most importantly, that “God sees the heart”. Therefore, all efforts of ascetic practices had to be focused on the heart.

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the Holy Fathers rejected the significance of reason and have denied the role of prudence in a human life. On the contrary, many direct appeals to the traditional Aristotelian virtues of prudence, courage, temperance and justice are found in the work in regard to interpretations of morality. In particularity, Mark the Ascetic explained that rational human beings were able to control not only their sensible experience but also one’s own desires⁵. Hence, in opposition to Medieval Scholasticism, the authors of *The Philokalia* did not consider the

4. St. Gregory Palamas, “In Defense of Those Who Devoutly Practice a Life of Stillness. Answer 3”, in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Volume 4, (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 334.

5. Mark the Ascetic, “On the Spiritual Law. Two Hundred Texts”, 176, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 122.

discursive procedures of intellect as the most important people’s activity, because the main strategy of monastic life was to achieve a state of silence and purity of mind.

The excessive talkativeness, especially the tendency to debates, was considered in the texts of *The Philokalia* a significant drawback, reflecting the passions of mind that violates the practice of monastic humility and leads to distance from God. In this connection St. Ephrem the Syrian reminded that monks “should speak quietly, calmly, rarely, as if under duress and with shame; do not expose yourself as a measure, do not argue with anyone about faith or anything else, but if someone speaks well, say “yes” to him, and if it’s bad, say “as you know””⁶. In addition, the desire to argue was perceived as a manifestation of active evil in a person, and so a special healing by repentance was required for its overcoming.

For the authors of *The Philokalia*, the truth in disputation with heretics was provided not by the convincing of arguments, but by the irrefutable firmness in faith. They believed that the fight against the forces of evil could not be based only on logical arguments and syllogistic conclusions. Moreover, there are direct prohibitions on disputes about faith and clear instructions to be content solely with the confession of faith. Moreover, Saint Maximus the Confessor taught that “faith without love does not actualize the light of spiritual knowledge in the soul”⁷. Thus, in

6. St. Ephrem the Syrian, “About the struggle with pride”, 334, in *Philokalia (supplemented by St. Theophan the Recluse) in five books and with quotations from the Holy Scriptures in Russian and in the Synodal translations*, Book II, (Moscow: “New Sky”, 2018), 324. This text is presented in Russian edition of “Philokalia”, but it is absent in English version. However, this citation looks a very demonstrative for the topic.

7. St. Maximus the Confessor, “Four Hundred Texts on Love”. First Century, 31, in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Volume 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 56.

accordance with the great theologian, the Christian faith was based on the experience of love and exactly on this foundation the light of truth could be found in the human soul.

In addition, it was stressed that the cognition of God required a moral improvement of a person. The Holy Fathers were totally convinced that theology was impossible without active virtue and moral perfection. For example, Mark the Ascetic said: “If you love true knowledge, devote yourself to the ascetic life; for mere theoretical knowledge puffs a man up”⁸. Therefore, it was necessary to beware of knowledge without deeds, without concrete spiritual experience. For the Holy Fathers, all abstract doctrines were absolutely unacceptable, believing rather that to speak the truth meant to do good, that there was no use in any knowledge if the soul of a person did not become kindly. In this context, St. Antony the Great argued that “the way to know God is by means of goodness”⁹. Thus, true knowledge did not consist in human erudition or the possession of a certain information; rather, it involves authentic practice of monastic life, hard spiritual work aiming for selflessness.

According to the Holy Fathers, true wisdom constitutes not simply in the knowledge of truth, but it also the capacity to bear humbly any evils, moreover, to learn to accept their impact as deserved. As Nikitas Stithatos explained, “truth is not evinced by looks, gestures or words, and God reposes not in the these things but in a contrite heart, a humble spirit and a soul illumined by

8. Mark the Ascetic, “On Those Who Think That They Are Made Righteous by Works. Two Hundred and Twenty-Six Texts”, 7, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 125.

9. St. Antony the Great, “On the Character of Men and on the Virtuous Life. One Hundred and Seventy Texts”, 29, in *Ibid.*, 333.

the knowledge of God”¹⁰. In this sense, the process of cognition of truth was a kind of practice of life, the truth was taken through the personal and existential participation in the truth. It can be said, that the real truth had to be lived. For example, St. Gregory of Sinai said that “it is only by participating in the truth that you can share in the meaning of truth”¹¹. As a result, truth was associated with the experience of the Christian faith, with deep religious feelings, with the process of *theosis*.

Nevertheless, attaining cognition of God, as it is stated in *The Philokalia*, was a long and complicated process of internal work and spiritual transformation, which covered the whole life of a person. In this regard, the monastics are appeared in the image of Christ’s warriors, who waged an irreconcilable struggle with demonic forces. At the same time, it was emphasized that this struggle became more and more severe as it developed, because the more success was shown in moving towards the spiritual world, the more the influence of the forces of evil was felt. Besides, the main enemy was inside of the person, so it was important to strive for the purity of heart, which required fasting of the soul, fighting against anger, envy, vanity and with distractions of heart.

Besides, the texts of *The Philokalia* explained that the monastics were active laborers, their days were “a time of labor and sweat”, and their life was built on the principle “from labor to labor”, and the more they worked, the greater was their spiritual reward. Every action of the ascetic had to be performed with love for his neigh-

10. Nikitas Stithatos, “On the Inner Nature of Things and on the Purification of the Intellect: One Hundred Texts”, 32, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 4, 115.

11. St. Gregory of Sinai, “On Commandments and Doctrines, Warnings and Promises; On Thoughts, Passions and Virtues and Also on Stillness and Prayer: One Hundred and Thirty-Seven Texts”, 22, in *Ibid.*, 216.

bor, otherwise it would be unacceptable to God. As a result, the life of a monk assumed as a constant work, both in a spiritual sense (struggling with passions, caring for purification of the heart) and in a practical dimension (as a specific activity within the monastery: needlework or a rural labor). Anyway, the both variants of labor were based on the free will of the ascetic. Meanwhile, in some types of activities of monastics the strategies of physical and spiritual labor were coincided. So, the working for brethren was considered as a kind of a special spiritual labor for beginners. The professional activity as a doctor was also classified as a kind of labor for the common good of the monastic brotherhood.

In *The Philokalia*, there are many references and indications concerning the labor, both in the terms of spiritual working with selfness, so in a sense of material production. For example, Abba Isaiah prescribes: “Love your work... Force yourself to needlework... Do not be lazy to work”¹². In a similar way, St. Ephraim the Syrian considered the exercise in needlework as a special bodily virtue, which is fundamentally important for the fight against the relaxing laziness, and at the same time he urged the monks to be like a bee:

Be attentive to yourself, so that you do not ever go into laziness, because the predominance of laziness is the beginning of destruction. Imitate the bee and look into its wondrous mystery, as it collects its works from flowers scattered on the earth. Let your mind concentrates on this insignificant creature. If you gather all the wise men of the earth, all the philosophers in the universe, they will not be able to make it knowable. And every reasonable person,

12. Abba Isaiah, “Rules and Advices to Novice Monks”, 4-13, in *Philokalia (supplemented by St. Theophan the Recluse)*, Book I, (Moscow: “New Sky”, 2018), 334-335.

seeing her works, praises the Creator of God, marveling that so much wisdom comes out of such a small creature¹³.

However, the Holy Fathers were sure that physical labor alone was not enough for the true ascetic life because monastic practices required a special working with self, so the most important activity of the monks was a permanent experience of inner prayer rooted in the heart. Therefore, the authors of *The Philokalia* said about the “labor of prayer” and the necessity “to work by the heart”. As a result, the spiritual acts were valued more, than physical operations, just as the moral mood of a person was valued more than the external doings, even if they were a really virtuous, because the internal mood was recognized as a main criterion of the true ascetic life. In this context St. Hesychios the Priest asserted: “Only he who has renounced the impassioned thoughts of his inner self, which is the intellect, is a true monk. It is easy to be a monk in one’s outer self if one wants to be; but no small struggle is required to be a monk in one’s inner self”¹⁴. At the same time, the spiritual life of a monk and his inner prayer experience had to be kept in silence. In this regard, it is established a principal difference in *The Philokalia* between the desire to demonstrate himself in front of other people and the inner purpose to be a monk (from the Greek Μοναχός is “a single”, “a singular person”).

Thus, the Orthodox ascetics believed that a hard daily work promoted a spiritual humility and internal dispassion, so it was a good way to control the body and to restrict the carnal temp-

13. St. Ephraim the Syrian, “General Lessons on the Ascetic Life”, 19, in *Philokalia* (supplemented by St. Theophan the Recluse), Book II, (Moscow: “New Sky”, 2018), 328.

14. St. Hesychios the Priest, “On Watchfulness and Holiness Written for Theodoulos”, 70, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 174-175.

tations. In this connection it is an important fact that such an outstanding Father of the Church as St. John Chrysostom also draws attention to this point in his conception of Christian ethics of labor¹⁵. In addition, it was emphasized in *The Philokalia* that any professional work (from the cook to the cellarer), that made by the monks faithfully and patiently, was necessarily encouraged. It has achieved a real significance both within the framework of the common activity of the monastic brotherhood, so on the path of personal Salvation of the ascetic. Therefore, all monks had to get own specific duties, corresponding to their physical strength and capabilities, their individual habits and professional skills.

It is asserted in *The Philokalia* that every work of ascetics was to be done before God and for the glory of God. Moreover, as the Holy Fathers emphasized, those who were diligent in simple work were also diligent in a spiritual life. Anyway, the labor was playing a distinct role in the formation of selfness of monks. In turn, some extremely difficult types of physical labor were prescribed for eliminating the established perverse skills and passions. In this way, usual labor was understood as an active enemy of lust and was perceived as an integral part of ascetic training of the body. In this sense, the working was presented in *The Philokalia* as a kind of spiritual therapy.

According to *The Philokalia*, a real physical labor was necessary to ensure the life of monks and the sustenance of indigents who looked for help in the Monastery. In addition, work for the

15. Oleg Dushin, "The Metamorphoses of Christian Concepts of Labor: St. John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, Nikolai Berdyaev", in *The Protestant Ethics of Labor and the Formation of Moral Consciousness of the European Individuality*, ed. Oleg Dushin, Konstantine Schmoraga (Pskov: Pskov State University, 2018), 44-45 (*Verbum*: Issue 20).

sake of daily bread was considered as a duty of all people who are able to work. At the same time, it was believed that young monks especially needed to work hard and constantly, because idleness and laziness became a source of various temptations and imaginations. Thus, the life of Monastery was linked with numerous types of professions and forms of labor. Nevertheless, it was necessary to observe a strictly certain measure between physical work and prayer practices. On the one hand, it was necessary to support the spirituality of the monastic brotherhood who prayed permanently; on the other hand, the monastic community needed to sustain itself. Moreover, it could not allow the monks to sit idle and fall into different temptations.

Also, the ascetics were required to work much because it gives them an opportunity to help those who were in need. Providing not only for oneself and also for others was an important rule for the monks in a social sense, when many simple people could not get sufficient food. Besides, a hard work was used as a penance and such kind of activity named "a penitential labor". In this perspective, it was believed that bodily labor helps to purify the heart. As a result, many Holy Fathers recognized that ordinary work had a really affirmative significance for the organization and regulation of monastic life. At the same time, they paid special attention to the motives of monks' labor activity, because their works should not be based on the desire to demonstrate themselves or to be directed to the other incorrect purposes. Furthermore, they noted that sometimes monks refused to work, explaining that would like to pray, but in fact hiding their laziness and desire for relaxation. Thus, it was an essential question for the monks because the labor could become totally useless, if monastic employment was motivated by corrupted intentions.

In this regard, the Holy Fathers proposed a variety of strict regulations and ethical norms for the monastic labor activity. Many of them were built on a psychological basis and were oriented in accordance with personality development. For example, if a young monk has an extremely passionate desire to work, derived from despondency, it was not welcome, because it was perceived as a form of temptation. In addition, ordinary needlework of monastics in their Monastery' cell should not have been accompanied by the passion of avarice, because such an inspiration to work was dictated by the thirst for profit, gradually replacing the will to dedicate oneself to other activities. Moreover, every obedience, regardless of the severity of work, had to be carried out humbly, and its products should not be displayed, so as not to contribute to the triumph of personal pride.

In this context, the Holy Fathers recognized that the grace of God was communicated only to those who worked with a much effort and transpiration. Nevertheless, according to them, activities by themselves did not ensure the full dispassion of the soul and purification of the heart. The physical and spiritual works were the necessary conditions for the moral improvement of a person, but the Holy Fathers insisted that it was impossible to achieve the transformation of a man without the action of grace. Nevertheless, the free will participates in Salvation on the assumption that every action of a human being is preceded by a free decision. In a sense, the freedom of will was perceived as the basis of any physical and spiritual activity of a man. In such respect, the righteous life of monks was a combination of ascetic labor and the action of grace; it was strictly supposed that the monk chosen the path of Christian humility.

Thus, the Holy Fathers claimed that virtuous work gives moral satisfaction and provides righteous retribution. In this connection

St. Neilos the Ascetic stressed that “the work of a virtue-doing man is a seed that gives undying fruit, and during the very act of doing of it the conscience is filled with the expectation of pleasure, and after the relocation from here it turns out to be gracious and to be predisposed to an eternal joy”¹⁶. Finally, it should not be forgotten that the obligation to work was the result of the Fall, and it was after this event that man was doomed to many labors. Therefore, as St. Neilos the Ascetic noted, people “should get food through much and much labor”, live “by sweaty labor” and discipline themselves “in all kinds of labor”¹⁷.

Moreover, the life of monks was determined by the principles of strict obedience to traditions, to their mentors, Holy Fathers, the Abbot and was based on the absolute humility. In general, the mentoring of Elders in communications with young monastics has got an exceptional importance in the Byzantine monasticism. The interaction with the Elders was a fundamental component of spiritual experience of monks, and it was a form of direct training in the ascetic practices. It is interesting that the different non-discursive acts were valued highly in this system of communication between young monks and experienced ascetics. For example, such actions as common prayers, being in a state of silence together, perception of the various religious feelings.

The practice of monastic life was built on a system of strict asceticism, which included the abstinence from too much sleeping, too much food, and any relaxing. In this regard, *The Philokalia* presents many specific recommendations regarding the organiza-

16. St. Neilos the Ascetic. Additions from Other Writings of St. Neilos the Ascetic, 33 in *Philokalia (supplemented by St. Theophan the Recluse)*, Book II, (Moscow: “New Sky”, 2018), 189.

17. Ibid, 190.

tion of sleep, labor and nutrition of monks. So the rule proposed by John Cassian concerning the meal was as follows: “stop eating while still hungry and do not continue until you are satisfied”¹⁸. In addition, it was prescribed to eat only once on ordinary days, and to observe a fast for two days a week during the period of Great Lent, and, on the other fasts, it could be only one day with the stipulation that the ascetic had to go without food during the whole day. Nevertheless, some authors allowed for food twice on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the normal weeks.

The important point is that both the excessive satiety and the excessive abstinence were considered as unacceptable. In this sense, the measure of eating and drinking should correspond to the kind of physical labor done by the monastics. If the monk worked a lot physically in the monastery, then it was allowed him to exceed the established norm, and it was not considered as a violation. If the desire for food took over the mind of the monk, and he could not resist it longer, this situation was considered as a manifestation of gluttony.

It is interesting that the different attitudes regarding alcohol can be found in the texts of *The Philokalia*. In general, the use of wine was allowed, although in limited doses, since wine was considered as a medicinal product and useful for maintaining the health. In any event, it refers only to dry red wine, diluted with water, remindful of the practice followed in Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, there are many instructions in *The Philokalia* that indicate serious dangers in excessive drinking of wine. Furthermore, the use of alcoholic beverages was strictly forbid-

18. St. John Cassian, On the Eight Vices. On Control of the Stomach, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 74.

den to young monks, so that their inner passions would not be increased because of the external influence of wine.

As concerns sleeping, the principle prescribed in *The Philokalia* is that one may sleep “half of the night”. Moreover, it was recommended to sleep while sitting to promote humility. As a result, it was necessary that every monk’s activity should get its own specific time, and all actions of monks would correspond to the established schedule in accordance with the monastery’s tradition. Besides, the ascetic should not keep anything superfluous in his cell, but only the most necessary, for example, a robe which had to be washed twice a year, and things needed for sleeping.

Thus, for the authors of *The Philokalia*, the level of theology could be reached only through a special spiritual-moral activity of a person. In this sense, the Christian theology was considered as a holy gift, the acquisition of which was accompanied by special divine benefits. However, to achieve this gift, it was necessary to work ascetically on oneself for a long time, most probably his whole life. This monastic practice of asceticism was based on permanent inner prayer and on the process of watchfulness over the heart and intellect. In this regard, the main strategy of life of monastics was to be constantly mindful and not give the body much opportunity to relax. Accordingly, it was necessary to attain a state of purity of heart and dispassion of soul that excluded of any influence of imagination. In this regard, the theological problem of St. Augustine concerning the priority between the grace and the freedom of human will (*liberium arbitrium*) was solved by the authors of *The Philokalia*: God supports all those who strive for Him, working diligently in both spiritual and natural domains, in conformity with Holy Scripture (*Matthew 11:28*).

